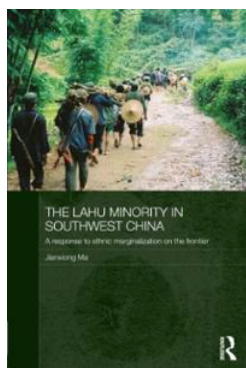


REVIEW: *RE-CONSTRUCTED ANCESTORS AND
THE LAHU MINORITY IN SOUTHWEST CHINA*

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Ma Jianxiong. 2013. *Zai zao de zu xian: xi nan bian jiang de zu qun dong yuan yu Lahuzu de li shi jian gou* 再造的祖先：西南边疆的族群动员与拉祜族的历史建构 [Re-Constructed Ancestors: The Mobilization of Ethnic Groups in (China's) Southwest Frontier and the Construction of Lahu History] Hong Kong: Chinese Hong Kong University Press. vii +210pp. Illustrations (maps and photos), bibliography, appendixes, timetable. ISBN: 978-962-996-501-3. Paperback = HKD120.



Ma Jianxiong. 2013. *The Lahu Minority in Southwest China: A Response to Ethnic Marginalization on the Frontier*. London and New York: Routledge. xvii + 252 pp. Illustrations (figures, tables, plates), acknowledgements, technical notes, appendixes, Chinese glossary, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-0-415-50558-1 (hbk 72 GBP); ISBN: 978-0-203-11564-0 (ebk). Hardback = USD156.75; Kindle = USD131.17; Kindle rental = USD38.70.

Written in Chinese, *Re-Constructed Ancestors: The Mobilization of Ethnic Groups in [China's] Southwest Frontier and the Construction of Lahu History*, consists of an Introduction, Conclusion, and five chapters. Following a critical review of the literature, in the Introduction, Ma presents his groundbreaking analytical framework

and methodologies concerning the ethno-history of southwest China, and the history of the Lahu in particular.

Entitled 'The Ethnic Politics in the Hinterland of the Ailao Mountains',¹ Chapter One explores interethnic relationships in China's southwest frontier region. By vigorously examining the historical documentation of officials and scholars, as well as archival records at the local level, Ma convincingly demonstrates the critical role that precious economic resources played in the dynamics of ethnic identity and inter-ethnic interaction in response to the expanding control of the Central Government of Imperial China (CGIC). In order to control the salt wells, tea production, and silver mining in the Ailao hinterland, the CGIC began to implement the policy of *gai tu gui liu* 'replacing indigenous leaders with bureaucrats' in this area from the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Until the Tianqi era (1621-1628), however, certain Ailao areas were controlled by complex indigenous forces, who, because of their threats to the transportation of salt, tea, and silver by government and private merchants, were disparagingly referred to as *tu zei* 'indigenous bandits' and *ye zei* 'wild bandits' (42).

After the early 1700s, the Manchu Imperial Court of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) radically intensified control of this area, not only by forcefully replacing the remaining indigenous political leaders, but also by confiscating their land and salt wells. The corrupt officials appointed by the CGIC levied heavy taxes and seized the land on which indigenous peoples depended for their very survival, resulting in increased conflict with the indigenous population. During the eighteenth century, several highland indigenous peoples, who were lumped together as "the Luo Bandits" (54), revolted repeatedly against both local officials and government control (60-61). By the time of the Daoguang era (1821-1850), the "ethno-ecology" (44) of the Ailao hinterland had undergone such a dramatic transformation that the number of Han immigrants exceeded that of the indigenous population. During this process, the CGIC incorporated the elite of

¹ The Ailao Mountains are located in the central region of Yunnan Province in southwest China.

some indigenous populations into its administrative apparatus. In contrast, however, the Luohei, one of the indigenous groups who were identified as relentless rebels (61-62), were excluded from participating in local administration and also expelled from the Ailao Mountains west of the Lancang (Mekong) River.

Chapter Two, 'Lahu Religious Movement and Mobilization of [Ethnic] Identity', examines the development of the Luohei/ Lahu identity within the context of their ancestors' defeat and retreat from Ailao in 1796 (72), and their ongoing revolt against Qing control until 1904 (79). Ma successfully demonstrates the connection between the Luohei in Ailao and the Luohe/ Lahu in the Luohei Mountains west of the Lancang River, located in contemporary Lancang and Shuangjiang counties. Whereas the Luohei revolts in Ailao areas were characterized by political and economic orientations, the later Luohei/ Lahu resistance was shaped primarily by fervent religious movements. Ma demonstrates how a Buddhist messianic movement originally started by two Han monks in 1799 (76), generated regional social organization and mobilization among the Luohei/ Lahu. Among contemporary Lahu, the history of their resistance is intertwined with their mythology and local legends concerning Xeul Sha Buddha, which combines Buddhism with a pair of supreme dyadic god(s) in the indigenous Lahu religion (82). Ma argues that originating from confrontational interactions between certain indigenous peoples in Ailao as they first encountered state power, the formation of Luohei/ Lahu identity was later re-created and restructured by incorporating the organizational power of Buddhist movements into the Lahu value system. This process is marked by 'identity mobilization', rather than 'identity drift', as was the case of the Qiang who were squeezed between the Han and the Tibetans (Wang 2003).

Entitled 'Frontiers and Frontier Rebels', Chapter Three explores historical processes by which the delineation of China's southwest frontier and the development of the Luohei ethnic identity interfaced. Ma examines the first wave of Han immigrants who entered Yunnan when the central government of the Ming Dynasty stationed soldiers

in the area charged with opening up the lush, uncultivated land. Through the example of several historical figures, he shows that immigrant elite frequently served as middleman, negotiating between officials, immigrants, merchants, and the leaders of indigenous ethnic groups regarding such matters as tributary, trade, and resource exploitation. He also argues that after driving the rebellious Luohei out of the Ailao hinterland, the CGIC named the place of the Lahu ancestors' retreat the 'Luohei Mountains'. This area became a fluid geo-political buffer between CGIC and Burma, the latter having maintained a tributary relationship with the former. After a British demand to draw up borders between Burma (a British colony) and the CGIC in 1880, the CGIC began to formally incorporate the Luohei Mountains into its administration system. During the transformation of China's Southwest frontier, the identity of the Luohei people was strengthened. Ma vividly demonstrates that historical documentation of the process of Lahu identity formation and development corresponds to migration legends and religious rituals found among contemporary Lahu people.

Based on solid archival research and a comprehensive investigation of historical literature, Chapter Four ('Frontier Politics and the Paradigms of Ethno-History') examines the paradigms of the historical documentation of the Luohei/ Lahu by the central Chinese government after the mid twentieth century. During the Nationalist regime (1912-1949), Yunnan Province was primarily controlled by regional warlords, who were the elite of some of the powerful ethnic minorities in the region. Ma poignantly argues that while these elites in Yunnan generally overlooked the differences between the Han majority and the ethnic minorities, a few minority scholars in other provinces of southwest China began to highlight their ethnic distinctiveness and negotiate their positions within the framework of the multi-ethnic Chinese state. During that same period, however, historical records concerning the Luohei were scarce, largely reflecting their marginality and powerlessness, even among local ethnic minorities. Ma further examines the official recognition of the 'Lahu', (which replaced the derogatory term 'Luohei') as a distinctive

min zu 'nationality' during the process of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) establishing Lancang Lahu Autonomous County in the early 1950s. Ma demonstrates that the contemporary Lahu 'nationality' is derived from their distinctive historical conflicts with state control, rather than being one 'allocated by the state' through the Nationality Identification Project initiated by the CCP.

Chapter Five, 'Searching for a History Originating from Qinghai', explores the Lahu's own reconstruction of their ethno-histories since the 1990s. Following the social evolutionary paradigm and utilizing a linguistic approach, the official (elite) version traced the origin of the Lahu to the ancient Qiang in Qinghai in northwest China. In a Lahu village on the west side of the Lancang River, Lahu history was reconstructed mainly through the route of soul-calling rituals, which intertwine Lahu cosmology with social memories associated with their ancestors' revolts against state control, and their subsequent retreats. On the east side of the Lancang River, where the ancestors of the local Lahu submitted to state control after major defeats, less tension with the state is embedded in the ritual and cosmological reconstruction of Lahu history, reflecting many generations of peace in this area. According to Ma, the official/ elite version, in spite of its extreme methodological deficiency and analytical insufficiency, has predominated and shaped other versions of indigenous reconstructions of Lahu history. Challenging the dominance of both the state and the ethnic elite in constructing ethno-history in China, Ma concludes the book by appealing for more academic attention to local constructions of ethno-history rooted in the identity struggles found in ordinary villagers' everyday life.

This book offers a groundbreaking study of the ethno-history and ethnic identities of China's southwest frontier. The methodological combination of vigorous historical examination and extensive ethnographic fieldwork is admirable, and the utilization of maps and photos is effective. Challenging conventional Chinese paradigms concerning the state and ethnic identity in China, and complementing Western approaches to this subject (Harrell 1995, Schein 2000, Mueggler 2001, Wang 2003), Ma provides an

innovative framework exploring the interplay between resource competition, state control, local resistance, and the development of ethnic identity. By presenting the Lahu as counterevidence, Ma (27-70) particularly confronts Scott's (2009) theorization of upland Southeast Asia and southwest China as 'Zomia', a specific geopolitical zone that has attracted the voluntary migration of minorities with flexible ethnic identities seeking to escape state control and modernity. Ma (39) demonstrates that upland areas where the ancestors of the Lahu originally resided were incorporated into the central Chinese government through a system of *tu si* 'hereditary native chieftain' during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1386). Additionally, the Imperial Chinese state made little distinction between upland and lowland when implementing the *tu si* system or later, when replacing the *tu si* with its regular bureaucrats (55-64). Within such a historical context, Lahu ethnicity was *intensified* in their process of resisting increased state control since the Qing Dynasty, *irrespective* of the altitude of the mountains where they either resided or retreated to (Chapters 1-2). Notwithstanding the significance of this book, however, its international accessibility is severely limited by a prerequisite requirement for mastery of both the Chinese language and local history.

Written in English, *The Lahu Minority in Southwest China: A Response to Ethnic Marginalization on the Frontier* is a work that promises to be far more accessible to international audiences. This book consists of six main chapters (2-7) in addition to the Introduction and concluding chapters. Complementary to the historical orientation of *The Re-Created Ancestors*, this solid ethnography is based mainly on Ma's extensive fieldwork in a Lahu village on the west side of the Lancang River since 1995.

While introducing the subject matter, theories, and methods, the first chapter also provides the historical background of the construction of China's southwest frontier during the Qing Dynasty. Entitled 'The Escape of E Sha Buddha: Ethnicity and Political Movements in the Black River Valley', Chapter Two describes the geographic, demographic, and ecological conditions of the Black

River Valley and explores the social change and the inter-ethnic relations in this area since the 1920s. Ma vividly presents personal accounts of the escape of the E Sha/ Xeul Sha Buddha, a dyad of male and female supreme god(s) in the religion of the Lahu, in the village that represented the center of Lahu religious movements against state control until its religious organization was destroyed at the turn of the twentieth century. Ma argues that by evoking such religious interpretations, Lahu villagers vocalize their perceived contradictions between Lahu principles and the radical social change induced by the socialist and post-socialist Chinese state.

Complementing one another, chapters Three and Four examine marriage and kinship relationships in the Lahu village where religious belief and socio-economic reality are tightly intertwined in villagers' everyday life. Chapter Three, 'Death Threat and Self-Negation: Tension and Pressure in the Spiritual World', examines the Lahu cosmic view of a dyadic and gender-egalitarian world, which is believed to have been created and maintained by E Sha or E Sha Buddha (63).² Within this cosmic world, the lives of Lahu villagers were believed to be influenced by a myriad of spirits, especially the spirits of their immediate ancestors, who serve as "omnipresent spiritual guardians of the families of their living children" (56).

In Chapter Four, 'Marriage and Land Property: Bilateral, Non-Linear Kinship and Communal Authority', Ma brilliantly presents the pivotal role that the supernatural beliefs of the Lahu play in shaping the social and economic organization of Lahu village life. The Lahu indigenous social organization is fundamentally based on marriage and a consequent bilateral kinship system, which is based on egalitarianism in general, and gender egalitarianism in particular (Du 2002). Ma demonstrates that authority of the parental couple is sustained not only by codes of ethics, but most importantly through continual ownership of the land, even after they have divided it equally among their sons and daughters as each one marries. Supernatural authority, ultimately through E Sha, but practically through the spirits of deceased parents, serves as the communal

² Also see Du (2002, 2003) and Walker (2003).

authority over the lives of parallel and equal households co-headed by husbands and wives. Frequent ritual interactions between adult children and their deceased parents become occasions for household and community members to appeal to supernatural authority for the cure of disease or the reversal of misfortunes which are believed to have been caused by any possible violations of social or moral codes.

Chapter Five, 'To Become Wives of the Han: Conflicts, Marriage Squeeze, and the Resettlement of Women', explores the outflow of Lahu women to marry Han men in other provinces since the 1980s. Rural Han men have had increasing difficulty in marrying within their ethnic group because of the sex-ratio imbalance, and the consequent skyrocketing of bride-price resulting from the birth control policy and the Han preference for sons over daughters (Shi 2009). Ma reveals that in spite of administrative barriers against such a practice, socio-economic conditions, inter-ethnic relations, and intricate 'middlemen networks', exist and have engendered waves of one-way migration and resettlement of Lahu women into rural Han areas. He demonstrates that while many Lahu women voluntarily left their home place to seek a better life, some tragically became the prey of deception or abduction. Ma argues that the representation of "advanced" Han and "backward" Lahu in the modernization discourse are hidden factors in this process of the "marriage squeeze" in the Lahu area (159).

Chapter Six, 'Poverty Reduction and Education', examines the negative impact of poverty reduction projects and education on everyday Lahu life. According to Ma, poverty reduction was a major policy of local government administrations at the level of the county, particularly in the Lahu township and village under study. Since the limited revenue of the local government could cover only a small portion of its expenses, much governmental funding allocated for poverty reduction was appropriated in order to maintain the function of this administrative apparatus. While implementing poverty reduction projects, the cadres require Lahu villagers to participate in 'education' sessions and to provide matching labor and resource for these projects. Ma argues that these poverty reduction projects and

their subsequent education programs were essentially "performance" (169) – a concept Ma utilizes to suggest an administrative showcase accompanied by corruption, reinforcing the hierarchical dichotomy between the 'advanced Han' and 'backward' Lahu. Additionally, negative representations of Lahu identity infiltrate the public education system through local educators and cadres.

Chapter Seven, 'Suicide as a Cultural Response and an Indicator of the Change in Social Relationships', investigates social and cultural underpinnings of the high incidence of suicide among Lahu in the Black River Valley and nearby areas. Through thorough archival research, Ma convincingly demonstrates the high suicide rate in that area at the peak of the Cultural Revolution (189). Based on first-hand data gathered from the village where he has conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork, Ma describes many suicide incidents, and demonstrates the dramatic increase of suicide frequency since 'the first decade of the twenty-first century.' In his detailed account of five suicide cases, Ma delves into the deeper socio-political background that lies behind the specific reason given for each death. Ma argues that the high incidence of suicide among the Lahu of the Black Valley area can be understood as a cultural response to their enormous suffering as a result of ethnic marginalization, particularly through the interaction of Lahu religious beliefs and dire socio-economic conditions, as well as through the increased disintegration of their traditional family and social structure. Notwithstanding the valuable data and analysis presented in this chapter, readers would have a more comprehensive understanding of Lahu epidemic suicide if the author had also taken into account the significant role played by the love-suicide songs of traditional Lahu oral literature (Du 2004, 2008).

In the concluding chapter, Ma recaps the book, and further suggests that the Lahu are situated at the most powerless end in the spectrum of power structure of China's *minzu* 'nationalities', particularly in regard to the effectiveness of minority cadres in representing and seeking resources for their own ethnic groups. Ma maintains that while it first originated from historic movements

against state control, the extraordinary level of Lahu marginalization is also a consequence of the breakdown of Lahu social organization by the political upheavals that occurred during the Mao era (1949-1976), and the exacerbation of socio-political circumstances since the 1980s.

This book greatly enhances understanding of the struggle and sufferings of a minority people who are extremely marginalized and almost invisible in China's "nationality politics" compared to such nationalities as Tibetans, Hui, Naxi, and Dai (2). Primarily grounded in solid ethnographic fieldwork, archival research and historical records effectively supplement the data. The balance between an analysis of the complexity and dynamics of identity representation and an ethnographic examination of social organization and religious belief deserves special applause. Notwithstanding the overwhelming impact of the state, and the institutionalized negation of Lahu identity, however, some readers might hope to learn more about the agency of contemporary Lahu in China. Specifically, the dedication to, and strategies of, some Lahu elite and folklore specialists in defending and preserving their own culture might have been addressed.

Overall, these two books engage in dialogue with each other as an in-depth ethno-history and an engrained ethnography of the Lahu people, respectively. Complementing one another, they jointly serve as very helpful resources for scholars and graduate students interested in the complex relationships between the state and marginalized ethnic groups, particularly those of southwest China and Southeast Asia.

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